

# MAKING PROGRAM ADAPTATIONS

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When introducing a prevention program into any community it is important to empower people in that community to adapt it and make it their own. The organizers should be prepared to hear reactions and critiques of the program and make adjustments to the program when appropriate. Your way doesn't equate to the right way or the only way.

Changes and adaptations to a program might include new language, metaphors, and specific strategies or activities. Adaptations may include how program content is presented and might include translations of some of the program materials such as brochures, handouts, and overheads into appropriate languages. Making such changes requires skillful guidance and leadership on the part of the leader/facilitator in order to maintain fidelity to the basic prevention program model.

Additional adaptations to the way the program is implemented may be in order. These may include:

Changing the scheduling and pacing. Most programs are designed with a specific pacing of information and activities. Some programs may move too fast for participants who come from a culture that values a more deliberative pace or more discussion time. Pacing should match cultural values. For example: A parenting class designed to be administered two hours per week for five weeks. It may be necessary to divide one session in a particular program into two or more sessions in order to more effectively communicate to some groups. Other groups may need information presented in a more condensed format.

Defining the nature of adolescent behavioral problems. It may be a mistake to assume that there is agreement among the participants in a parent- or family-oriented program about the nature of the problem in the community. The community may be experiencing denial of the problem for example. Other problems may be perceived more far more serious than alcohol and other drug use. Assessing the perceptions of the participants about adolescent behavioral problems is an important first step.

Emphasizing strengths as well as risks in the community. Although reducing the risks associated with adolescent behavioral problems is a valid goal, in some communities it is useful to focus on enhancing protective factors and other positive elements in the community. Particularly in communities where children are exposed to many risks, parents may be discouraged by a focus on risk exposure. In these communities an emphasis on promoting protective factors may be more empowering. It is important to seek out and build on community and family strengths.

Preparing to adapt materials. Written material as well as any visual aids may need to be adapted or at least carefully explained in order to prepare participants to use them. In some cases it may be preferable to develop alternative materials that present the same ideas and concepts in a more culturally or linguistically relevant way.

Being sensitive to language. Some words and terminology may not be appropriate in particular cultures. For example, the word “bonding” may have little meaning for some participants. “Family togetherness” might be more appropriate. Use of slang, jokes or analogies may lose their meaning when translated. For example: “Turn over a new leaf” is commonly used in the English language. When it is translated into Spanish, it becomes “Vortiar una nueva oja”. When you use the straight translation, the listener only hears turn over a new leaf, not the meaning you may have intended.

Respecting parental authority. Some parent-based prevention programs encourage democratic decision-making in the family. Certain cultures may prescribe more hierarchical roles for authority and decision-making in the family. Program content may need to be adapted in order to take this into account.

Recognizing that definitions of “family” may differ. Many different family structures are found in the US today. In some cultures, other relatives, close friends, and respected community leaders play important family roles and should be included in programs that promote families’ involvement.

Allowing for and respecting different ways of expressing emotion. Openly expressing emotion in some cultures isn’t appropriate. In contrast, in some cultures highly expressive behavior may be appropriate. It’s best not to judge but to observe how emotion is expressed in the targeted group and orient the presentation to fit the group.

Recognizing strong cultural identity as a protective factor. In communities of color a strong positive cultural identity may be an important protective factor. “No matter how many generations away from the old country you are,” said one participant, “a strong sense of culture can be the glue that holds a family together.” A strong positive cultural identity might be developed at any one of the four levels of acculturation described in the model presented by Peter Bell. The important point is the need for such an identity--and the difficulty of establishing it in a society that places an emphasis on mainstream culture and values to the exclusion of other cultures and values.

Recognizing the importance of spirituality. An element of positive bonding in some communities is the importance of spirituality. For example: people oriented to traditional cultures often place a greater emphasis on the spiritual element in their lives than do those who tend to be more acculturated. Spirituality can be and often

is an important protective factor in communities of color, contributing powerfully to the maintenance of belief and shared values.

When adaptations of a program are made, people who understand the culture of the particular community should be involved in making those adaptations. The organizer and leader of community based planning needs to be highly skilled and sensitive to a wide range of issues. Programs should be carefully scrutinized and adapted in order to be culturally appropriate.

Understanding the cultural dynamics of the local community will be a necessary step in doing this. The organizer will then need to carefully weigh what kinds of modifications should be made in order for the program to be as effective as possible in the specific setting where it will be used. This entails keeping the key elements of the program, but adapting the communication style and mode of delivery to make it most readily acceptable to the groups involved.